The Fourth Church Pulpit

HERE, THERE, EVERYWHERE

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture : Matthew 28:16-20, Exodus 3:1-12

"... Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."
Exodus 3:5 (NRSV)

Two weeks ago our children's choir was singing at the Sunday evening vesper service. It was a splendid occasion. Some of the folks from the community supper were there, as they always are. Some young adults from our Fourthcomers group were there along with the regulars; a smattering of guests from the hotels and, as always, a few people who just happened to be walking by and, of course, the children and their parents.

Karen Maurer, our Director of Education, told me about something one of the youngsters, Stuart Whitmore, said on the occasion. Stuart is five. He has been here before; he's one of our regulars, but something seemed different to him this time. Perhaps it was the early evening hour. In any event, Stuart was mesmerized. He looked up and around and took it all in and leaned over to his mother and whispered ... "So high! So, soooo high!"

His mother nodded, and Stuart kept looking up and around and all about and leaned over with something further to say. She leaned down and Stuart whispered ... "God is here."

God is here. It's a topic those of us who are associated with this church have been thinking a lot about recently. God is here. But what if "here" isn't here anymore?

The question of sacred space, the sense of place as part of a church's ethos, its essence, its life, is very much on our minds these days as we cope with moving. Do you recall your last move? Like major surgery, moving has a way of fading from consciousness over time, and so we are always unprepared for its power.

The experts tell us that moving is high on everybody's stress barometer, right up there with death, divorce, and 'tting fired.

We discovered something else about moving. It creates a funny mathematics. When there are a lot of people involved in the move a kind of "quantum-leaping geometry" takes over. The normal stress generated by one person's move, when interfaced with the stress of a colleague at the next desk also dealing with the move, expands so that two stressed-out people actually are generating enough stress to immobilize four or five people. So when the numbers escalate, the stress, you might say, becomes fairly impressive.

We have a Counseling Center. We asked the professionals to help us deal with the stress and so they organized a cookout and advised us that the only therapeutic measures they could think of were bratwurst, hamburgers, potato salad, and enormous chocolate chip cookies.

So, if you see a staff person wandering about after worship this morning, looking forlorn and lost, like a woman or man without a country or at least a desk to which to retreat, you might offer a word of comfort and encouragement; and you might want to wait until next week sometime to share your most recent inspiration for a new church program!

We will make it, but we are thinking a lot about place — sacred space. We are fond of saying that the church is not a building. The church is people. But the fact is we don't have much experience being the church without a building. We've been heavily into real estate for centuries, after all. So much so, that the word "church" itself, which originally meant "a community of people," now in contemporary English has come to mean the building the people use in order to be the church. But we still like to tell ourselves that the church isn't the building, and that we could easily be the church without the building because the church, after all, is the people.

But it's not quite that simple. Something happens to the building the people build in order to be the church. In the first place they design it to remind them of important ideas; sometimes they design it to be high and mysterious and awe-inspiring; sometimes they build it to be clean and simple and orderly. And sometimes they design it extravagantly, lush and colorful, with fat little cherubs singing all over the ceiling. They invest the building with ideas that remind them of who they believe God is and who they are and what the relationship is all about.

And then, over the years, the things the people do in the building being the church, further endears the space to them. It becomes, to them, sacred space, and they respect it and behave reverently and are deferential when they enter it. I'll bet you'd have no trouble remembering in detail the church of your childhood, sacred space for you.

It is a major event, we have discovered, to pack up a church and move a block away because even though the church is people, the building has become very important, and is far more than a functional facility. It has become sacred space — Holy Ground.

What makes a place sacred? Is it only the way it looks? Is it sacred because it is Gothic and has pews in it?

One of the oldest religious ideas of all is that nature is sacred. One antiquities scholar put it this way: "Ancient mythological cults all focus on a holy place." Mountains, valleys, rivers, were holy and people built altars or shrines on them, made pilgrimages to them, performed religious rituals there.

The ancient Hebrews put a special twist on the old idea that nature is holy and it is one of the defining characteristics of Christianity as well. A place becomes holy, not because it possesses inherently the character of holiness, but because of some divine activity, some revelation of God, or truth, or goodness, or beauty, and some faithful human response. Space becomes important because of what happens in it or on it.

Tomorrow is the fiftieth anniversary of the Allied invasion of France. It was raining when I finally made it to the American Military Cemetery in Normandy, on a bluff overlooking what we have come to know as Omaha Beach.

I was in elementary school in June of 1944. My most precious treasure was a jacket on which my mother had sewn the military insignia sent to me by two uncles — both of whom were subsequently killed — and two cousins. I recall the day, D-Day, and my parents' excitement and their tears. Each had a brother and a nephew involved. And so, as in the case with millions of people, it was something of a religious pilgrimage for me.

Over the years I have read as much as is possible to read about it. I knew the contours of each beach, the cliffs at Point-du-Hoc. But nothing I had read, no picture I had seen, prepared me for the experience of the cemetery; you've seen it too, in pictures perhaps: row upon row upon row of small, simple crosses and Stars of David, gleaming white against the grass of Normandy.

Even though the world is still a dangerous and violent place, and even though revisionist historians wonder if the ultimate outcome would have been any worse or better had we stayed home, and even though cynics suggest that it was more about economics and jobs and wealth than about freedom and peace, I thought I was standing on Holy Ground; a place made sacred because of selfless courage, a holy place because young men, faced with mortal danger, decided in an instant to give all they had to give. Places become holy because of what happens in them or on them.

The story of Moses is the prototype. It's about an encounter with God at a specific place which God calls Holy Ground. It's a great story. Moses, son of a Hebrew slave, is brought up in the court of Pharaoh, rises through the ranks of the royal household, disguising his Jewishness, and one day attacks and kills an Egyptian guard whom he catches in the act of beating a Hebrew slave. Moses runs for his life, ends up in the wilderness of Midian, meets a young woman, marries, is welcomed into his father-in-law's business, and settles down. In fact, he's tending Jethro's sheep, when he sees a burning bush, is filled with awe and fear, takes a closer look and hears a voice instructing him to remove his shoes because he's standing on Holy Ground.

Thus far it could be a Canaanite story. Moses is in a holy place having a mystical religious experience. The god revealed is a God of mysterious power, what Rudolph Otto characterized as the "mysterium tremendum."

Even that basic sense of holiness is difficult for modern people. We do not, in fact, live close to nature. And we do not, in fact, experience the mystery and power of creation in a way that evokes a sense of the sacred.

Kathleen Norris observes that it is because modern urban Americans have no sense of sacred place that tourists romanticize Native American culture and claim to have found peace and oneness with the earth after a two-night camping trip in the Black Hills.

Annie Dillard's bestseller, *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek,* is about taking time to look, listen, taste, feel the mysterious holiness in the world. "Something pummels, something barely sheathed. Power broods and lights." [p. 13]

Moses' experience does not end with a sense of holy. The voice goes on and doesn't instruct him to build a shrine for pilgrims to visit, but to go to Egypt and free slaves. Religious experience includes a summons to mission. God in this religion is mysterious power, but also a justice bringer, a compassionate presence, a lover. Holy Ground is where God is revealed and where justice and compassion and love go to work.

It is true that God is here. But what is even more true is that this building is not a container of the holy — a God-box, as it were — but a sign, a symbol that God is in the world and that there are holy places where God is known and where human beings respond to God's summons to justice, compassion and love.

This is sacred space because we baptize babies here and couples pledge vows of faithfulness here, and here we commit our dear ones to God's love. This is Holy Ground because of what happens here — a good thing to remember as we move a lot of what happens here to other locations: 190 E. Delaware, a former graduate school of business becomes Holy Ground as children learn and older adults study and as support groups meet and worship is planned and choirs rehearse and youngsters are tutored. And God is present at the corner of Wabash and Huron as our Social Service Center goes to work at St. James Cathedral. And God is present at Holy Name School and Quigley as other parts of our programs are transplanted.

Holy Ground is where God is experienced, not only as mysterious power, but also as compassionate justice-giver and lover and where faithful people hear the summons and respond.

It's the essence of Christianity: a turning to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior: an acceptance of Jesus Christ as definer of truth, as moral compass, as friend and comforter and guide: and, a simultaneous turning toward neighbors and family and city and world in his name and for his sake.

It could not be more appropriate that on this Sunday, as this church experiences something very different; as we are in a way detached for a while from much of our sacred space, and as this space itself begins to undergo a radical transformation, which will eventuate in something stunningly beautiful, but in the meantime may not be so elegant, it is appropriate that we participate in the ritual, the sacrament, the sacred act of the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion.

The table is the holy place. The meal is holy because of what was once said and done. It is for us — the presence of Jesus Christ.

And it is also a symbol that he is present in the world; that every meal has sacramental possibilities; that his summons to listen and believe and follow and serve comes to us here in this place, and then leads us out into a world which yearns for truth, a world that needs his love, a world where holiness waits for us.

God promised Moses to be with him as he left the sacred place and went into the world to respond faithfully. The promise is for this church — and for you and me.

Thanks be to God.